

MINDFUL MENTOR

BARRY DAVIES, PRACTICE DIRECTOR



Mental health awareness is a topic high on the agenda across all industries, but what about the legal sector? Legal is identified by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) as one of the most stressful sectors, but it's also been perceived as an expected 'pressured environment', with focus being on big billers - and the 'first in, last out' or presenteeism mentality to office hours - before we consider client demands and relationships with peers.

Such pressurising factors might make it difficult to take a step back and identify signs of mental health issues. How prepared are law firm managers to identify and, as best possible, support those experiencing poor mental health while at the same time being alert to their own state of mind. Those in senior positions are as likely to display symptoms of stress without realising it.

I recently attended a two-day mental health first aid course (facilitated by the Law Society in Wales) with the purpose of gaining better skills and understanding for providing initial help to people experiencing mental health distress such as depression, anxiety and psychosis. The course was designed not with the intention of creating medical experts but to help develop a greater understanding and awareness of such conditions - and it was certainly worthwhile.

Quite often there are external factors that cause an individual to go through poor mental health such as a relationship breakdown, bereavement or financial worries, to name a few, but some workplace issues are: workload, client needs and demands, lack of support or supervision (particularly for the younger lawyers), competition, (for promotion and approval from managers), billing targets and chargeable hour expectations, financial and business concerns (for partners or boardroom disputes).

Some of the common signs that you, or a colleague, may be experiencing mental health symptoms are: physical changes (sometimes in appearance, such as skin issues, sleep issues, excess perspiration, weight changes, or stomach issues), increased alcohol consumption or taking recreational drugs as a coping mechanism, erratic or inconsistent diet and mealtimes, sudden mood swings and irritability, chest pains, shortness of breath, shaking or twitchy actions.

So, what can law firms do to assist? Many firms offer private medical insurance to their fee earner and quite often all staff. It's worth considering an Employee Assistance Scheme if one is not already in place. Ensure that staff are aware of the policy and place helpline numbers in prime locations such as the staff canteen or in washroom areas. Consider a mental health first aider. And this doesn't have to be a partner of the firm, but it's beneficial if it's one of your HR team and someone who is able to listen. It's also worthwhile 'mapping' your workforce to identify any risk areas that may be present in comparison to HSE trends based on age and gender.

What might individuals do for themselves to help?

- Self-reflect to get to the nub of what is causing you to feel this way
- Take time out - make use of your leave entitlement and do something you enjoy that is not related to work
- Talk to someone - a good listener
- Breakdown your problems into manageable pieces and try not to get overwhelmed
- Eat healthily and get some exercise. Spend time away from your desk, preferably in daylight
- Try to avoid alcohol, smoking, and (if applicable) recreational drugs.
- Consider mindfulness techniques or cognitive behavioural therapies

In an industry such as the legal sector, one of the major issues to overcome is the long-enconced cultural environment. This is especially true at a time when we see a multi-generational workforce with a varying degree of attitudes to mental health. Some employees see it as a weakness to admit feeling stressed and fear that they may be writing their own P45. Progress is being made in raising mental health awareness but, in an environment that inevitably comes with a lot of work pressures, it may take a little time. **LPM**

ABOUT

Barry Davies
Practice director
Douglas-Jones Mercer
www.djm.law.co.uk

Revenue: £3.5m

Corporate status: Limited company

30 fee earners, 50 total staff

Offices: Swansea, Mumbles, Cardiff, Porthcawl

